

## Three Halves Make a Whole

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Summary: When seven-year-old Little Joe gets the wrong end of an idea and twists it out of shape, it's up to his family to straighten things out. An early prequel story before Adam has left for college.

### Three Halves Make a Whole

This was just a little snippet that came out of a conversation with a small child that I know. Kids have a way of getting things all bent out of shape and their logic is sometimes very interesting.

**\*\*Three Halves Make a Whole\*\***

"Joseph, are you listening to me?" Miss Barry tapped her pointer on the edge of his desk and Joe jumped back from the sharp noise. He had been thinking about the family of frogs he'd found the afternoon before with Hoss and was planning to go back and find them again after school. He most definitely wasn't paying attention to the arithmetic lesson his teacher was trying to impart.

"Ummm," he tried to think quickly what he was supposed to be doing and was too slow.

"Joseph Cartwright, you will stay after school and we will talk about this constant day-dreaming of yours. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am." He dropped his head again and tried to ignore the snickers that carried across the room. He couldn't bring himself to look behind him to where Hoss was seated and see the disappointment on his brother's face. Hoss didn't like school any more than he did, but he seemed to skirt danger less often and stay on the teacher's good side.

His teacher's droning voice sought out another target and Joe went back to staring at the slate in front of him. Fractions were a new

term and foreign concept that seemed designed to torture him. His seven-year-old mind could not think of one useful thing for chopping things into smaller imaginary pieces unless it was to share his lunch with Mitch. He glanced across at his best friend's slate and almost groaned aloud when he noted how far ahead Mitch was. Miss Barry sure would be mad if she came back and saw how little he had done. The problem was that fractions just didn't make any sense to him.

Joe heard Mitch cough beside him and he looked up again to see his friend nudging his slate higher up on the desk. He took another quick glance behind him to see where the teacher was and he quickly began to scribble down Mitch's answers. He had no clue what any of them meant, but he figured his teacher would be happy to see some answers instead of a blank slate. By the time their teacher declared it was lunchtime, he was only a few questions behind Mitch. He happily handed his slate to the teacher so she could mark them over the lunch break and ran for the freedom of the yard outside.

As he sat under the tree and tried to eat the food that Hop Sing had packed for him, he tried to ignore the sickening feeling that was rising in his stomach. Having to stay back after school meant his father would get a note sent home and that was almost always followed by a visit to the barn. Hoss would have to wait for him and any idea of finding those frogs was rapidly disappearing. He fiddled with the food in his hands and eventually shoved it back into the small lunch pail. Mitch pointed toward the container and asked if he was going to eat it. Joe pushed the whole thing towards him and mumbled something about not being hungry. When Mitch finally decided that Joe wasn't going to play anything either, he ran off to see what ball game was happening on the other side of the building.

"Hey, dummy!"

Joe groaned as Henry Wilson and his two shadows stepped in front of where he was still seated. Henry was three grades ahead of him and a good foot and a half taller than Joe. For some reason known only to Henry, he took great delight in making the youngest Cartwright squirm. He was careful enough to choose his moments and make sure that Hoss was nowhere to be seen and once again, he squared up to his victim.

"Dummy can't figure out his fractions." The laughter seemed to surround Joe as he tried to sink further into the ground. "Dummy don't know how to figure out his numbers."

Joe felt his fists clenching as he tried to think of something to respond with. He did know his numbers because Adam always drilled him on them. He just couldn't figure out fractions.

"I do know my numbers! Adam can tell!"

"Adam! Who cares what Adam says? Adam ain't here to do ya fractions for ya, dummy."

One of the other boys stepped up, spurred on by Henry's smirk. "You should be able to do fractions real well in your family, dummy. Since my ma says you're all just a half brother anyways."

"What?" Joe stared at the trio who were laughing wildly.

"Guess that makes you only half a Cartwright."

"Yeah. The dumb half!"

Joe was on his feet and staring at the three boys in front of him. His fists clenched by his side and he wanted to swing at any and all of the faces that mocked him. Before he could do anything further, one of the boys shoved him hard against the tree and Joe saw red. He felt his fist connect with something twice and suddenly a hand was yanking at his collar.

"Joseph! Stop it now!"

"He hit me, Miss Barry!"

"And I'm sure you did nothing to provoke it, Henry! Now go on inside and I'll talk to you shortly." The tone of her voice left no room for argument and Henry and his cronies slunk off towards the classroom door. She turned back towards where Joe was nudging the toe of his boot into the dirt and trying to bring his anger under control.

"Now, Joseph, what was that all about?"

When Joe shrugged his shoulders and refused to speak, the teacher sighed softly. She'd seen Henry and his backup targeting Joe before, but had never been quick enough to hear the substance of it. If he wasn't going to talk, there wasn't a whole lot she could do until he did, except watch and wait. She pointed towards the classroom door and frowned as he obeyed without comment. It was most unlike the boy she knew to surrender without at least a pretense of a fight or arguing his case.

By the time she got to interrogating Henry and his two friends, none of them were talking aside from pointing the finger at Little Joe. She reminded them that he was three grades lower than them and that since there were three of them against one of him, she was watching all four of them. Until she had something of substance to go on, there was little she could do without possibly making things worse for Joe.

That afternoon, she tried again to teach the basics of fractions to her lower grade students and she watched closely as Joe seemed distracted. Finally she leaned down in front of him and asked him what was wrong.

"I was just thinkin'. You said you take half of something away, but what do you do with that other half? Where does it go?" Joe looked up at her with a strange expression on his face and she smiled.

"Well, I suppose we don't need the other half, Joseph. We can throw it away." It was meant to demonstrate a simple principle and she had no idea that her young pupil would see it any other way than what she meant.

At that moment, a loud squeal from the back of the room drew her attention and she rushed to the farthest row. Darcy had progressed from squealing to outright screaming and the problem was soon apparent as a tiny mouse scurried down the length of the room and disappeared into a hole in the floor. Loud guffaws from across the

room gave away the culprits and for the next half an hour the teacher had her hands full with dealing with a hysterical young girl and two recalcitrant boys.

By the time the teacher declared it was home time, she was rubbing her forehead at the beginnings of a headache. She had all but forgotten her earlier comment to Joe and she dismissed the entire class, happy to see the end of a trying day. He hung back, unsure of what to do. If he escaped and she had simply forgotten, his punishment would be twice as bad the next day. If he stayed, he'd be going home with a note for his pa that outlined him having punched another student. Caught between the two possibilities, he stood at the back of the room and shuffled from one foot to the other until the teacher finally noticed he was there.

"Joseph?"

"Umm ... you said for me ta stay back after school."

Miss Barry nodded at him and beckoned him towards the desk. She smiled as she saw the reluctance in his pace. "Joseph, I understand that whatever is going on in that head of yours is probably far more interesting than verbs and nouns, but while you are in my classroom, you need to focus on my lessons. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am." Joe stared at the floor, waiting for the inevitable punishment.

"Now, suppose you tell me what was going on with you and Henry at lunchtime?"

He swallowed down a lump and continued to stare at the floor. If he told her what Henry had said about him being dumb, she might just confirm his fear. After all, he couldn't do his arithmetic the same way Mitch could. Maybe he really was dumb.

"Nothin'. It was nothin'!"

She watched as he squirmed under her gaze and decided against pushing the issue. Something was going on with Henry and the older boys and she determined to keep a closer eye on things.

"All right, Joseph. But I need you to remember something." She hooked a finger under his chin and lifted his face to where he could see her. "You can tell me if there is something wrong."

Joe nodded and stepped back at the same time. He had no plans to tell her anything, but if it got him out the door without a note for his pa, he was okay with that.

The ride home with Hoss was unusually quiet as Joe's normal running commentary was noticeably absent. Hoss tried to raise the same questions that their teacher had, but Joe simply clammed up. For his part, Joe was mulling over the things he had learned over the course of the day. He was something called a half brother. And only half a Cartwright. The dumb half. And if a half of something wasn't needed, it got thrown away. Who would need the dumb half of anything? He held onto the saddle horn as Hoss held the reins from behind him and he tried to keep his tears in check.

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><p>Supper that night was a quiet affair and Ben began to wonder if his youngest was sickening for something. He had pushed his food around his plate and not spoken at all unless directly addressed. Even then, he'd only answered in single words. When Adam asked if he needed any help with his homework, he'd almost choked on his mouthful of food. He couldn't let Adam see just how dumb he was if he couldn't even work out simple fractions. Henry's derisive laugh echoed in his ears as he shook his head. Adam was smart and Pa would keep the smart half around. He wondered if Adam and Hoss were a half brother too, but then he suddenly thought of something. There were two halves in a whole. Miss Barry had said so. Adam and Hoss were the first two sons and together they added up to a whole. He'd learned that much in Miss Barry's lesson.<p>

That left him as just a half on his own.

A leftover half.

A dumb half.

The kind of half that got thrown away.

Ben watched as Joe dragged himself up the stairs after supper and he decided he'd ask Hoss first if he knew anything about what was bothering his brother.

Hoss chewed on his bottom lip. It was a dead giveaway that he knew something and Ben stood in front of him with his hands on his hips. Hoss had no wish to get his brother into trouble, but his father's glare was too hard to ignore.

"I think that Henry Wilson was givin' Joe a hard time today. By the time I got wind of it, Miss Barry was marchin' them all inside."

Ben frowned at the comment. He knew Henry Wilson to be a troublemaker whose parents wouldn't do much to put a stop to it. They considered that boys were boys and while Ben could agree to a certain extent, he'd seen a nasty streak in the youngest Wilson boy that he didn't like. If Joe was on his target list, he wanted to know about it.

"Didn't Little Joe say anything on the way home?"

"No, Sir. He didn't say much of nothin' on the way home."

Adam had already followed Joe up the stairs with the excuse of checking on his homework. He knew his little brother well enough to see something was bothering him and while his pa grilled Hoss, he figured he'd tried directly. He nudged open Joe's door, expecting to find him getting ready for bed. Instead he found his little brother sitting curled up on his window ledge, staring out the window.

"Joe? You alright there?"

Joe startled as Adam stepped into the room and he hastily brushed away the trace of tears on his cheeks.

"Fine!" The snap in his tone did nothing to deter Adam and simply

confirmed his suspicions.

"Hey, little buddy. Want to tell me what's bothering you?"

"No!"

"Maybe I can help fix whatever it is." Adam had already figured that Joe was worried he'd be in trouble for fighting as he'd heard the last of Hoss' comment on the way up the stairs.

"You can't fix nothin'." The hopelessness in the comment tugged at him and he tried again as he crossed the room.

"Joe, brothers help each other out when there's a problem."

"I ain't your brother." The comment was barely audible and Adam slid down onto the side of the bed.

"Well that's news to me. I was right here in this house when you were born, Joe. Across the hall there. I'm pretty sure you are my brother." He tried a smile, but Joe wasn't responding.

Joe's tears began again and he could not hold them in check. He looked up at his oldest brother and wanted to run from the truth. "But they said â€¦"

"Who said what, Joe?"

"They said I'm only half a brother. And only half a Cartwright. And nobody needs the dumb half of nothin'!"

Adam reached out both hands to grasp his little brother's skinny arms as he shook his head. "Joe, I don't know who said any of those things to you, but you are not half of anything."

Ben walked across the room with Hoss in tow and he suddenly understood what was bothering his youngest son. He just didn't know why. His boys all knew they had different mothers and it had never been a secret.

"Joseph, do you know what it means to be a half brother?"

"That I ain't a whole brother. Not like Adam and Hoss."

Ben frowned as he sat down beside Adam and tried to calm his distressed son. He shook his head at the boy's answer and tried to decide how to respond.

"Joe, you've always known that you and your brothers have three different mothers. This has never bothered you before. Why would it suddenly matter now?"

Joe stared at the floor as his tears dripped from his chin. "When you don't need a half of somethin' â€¦ you can throw it away."

Ben looked across at Adam to see if he was making any sense of things. When he shook his head too, Ben sighed out loud. It wasn't until Hoss nudged at his elbow that he looked away from Joe's tear-stained face.

"Pa, I think I might know what Little Joe's tryin' to say. Miss Barry was doin' their 'rithmetic lesson today on fractions and she said ya could throw away the half ya don't need."

Ben still wasn't understanding until he recalled Joe's previous comment. He was just a half brother, but Adam and Hoss were not. He was superfluous. His son's logic escaped him, but he pressed on anyway.

"Joe, why do you think you are the only half brother here?"

When Joe refused to answer, Ben gently lifted his chin with his fingertip. "Son?"

"Adam â€| and Hoss â€| well you can add them up and they make up a whole brother. And that leaves me. I ain't got another half and nobody needs ta keep the dumb half of anythin'!"

"Oh, Joseph. Being a half brother is just a way to explain a family connection. It doesn't define who you are. And I can't just add Adam and Hoss together and leave you out of the mix. By that logic, all three of you are only half a Cartwright."

Joe looked up in stunned disbelief.

"Each of you is half my son and half your mother's son. Together that makes for a wonderful whole. Each of you is unique and incredible and one hundred percent brothers."

Adam smiled as Joe began to nod slowly in understanding. "How about tomorrow we do a lesson on fractions and we can work this thing out together?"

Joe nodded enthusiastically as he stared back at his older brother.

"And Joe, you are anything but dumb. You have an inventive mind and a way of seeing the world that keeps us all on our toes." Before he could say anything further, Joe flung his arms around Adam's neck and clung onto him as Adam hugged him back.

Hoss grinned as Joe looked over Adam's shoulder at him. "Tomorrow I reckon we can give ol' Henry a 'rithmetic lesson too!"

End  
file.